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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"I Think Most of Society Hates Us": A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Interviews with Incels

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Abstract

Involuntary celibates, or "incels," have received increased public attention in past years, likely as a result of media reports that link incels to incidents of mass violence. Although prior research has examined various elements of the online community, none have directly engaged with incels to understand the causes and effects of their inceldom. Using a hegemonic masculinity framework, this article analyzes data from interviews with incels ($N = 10$) to identify emergent themes about their situations, attitudes, and experiences. The data reveal that the participants feel that they 1) experience masculinity challenges that affect their romantic opportunities, 2) are marginalized or treated as "subhumans" due to their appearance or other characteristics, and as a result, 3) experience negative emotions related to their inceldom. This, in turn, affects their belief in the BlackPill and their online behavior such as shit-posting. Supported by interview data, these findings can highlight both the similarities and diversity of thought within the incel community while also examining the ways that hegemonic masculinity can lead to the marginalization of specific groups of men. As such, this study can inform future research about incels, suggesting that it should include continued interaction with members of the community and quantitative survey research about incels. Furthermore, it can outline and inform intervention strategies addressing the negative effects of gender hegemony that should be considered for individual approaches to inceldom.

Keywords Involuntary celibate · Incel · Thematic analysis · Masculinity · Hegemonic masculinity · Sex roles · Rejection

Involuntary celibates (henceforth, incels), both individually and collectively, have found themselves at the forefront of public discourse. Often defined by a deep mistrust of women and misogynistic and anti-feminist beliefs and rhetoric, incels have been described as the next domestic terrorist threat (Anti-Defamation League, 2020; Hoffman et al., 2020; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2020) following a series of violent attacks by self-reported incels across Canada and the United States. Generally speaking, incels collectively express frustration with society's hierarchical views of manhood at the local, national, and global levels (Ging, 2019) that leave less attractive men without prospects for sexual relations, and thus they perceive themselves as a disadvantaged and oppressed population of men.

The purpose of the current study is to assess the experiences of incels within the context of hegemonic masculinity. A hegemonic masculinity framework (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018) postulates that multiple masculinities exist as a hierarchical structure within society. At the top of this social structure are those hegemonic masculinities that uphold unequal gender relations (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018) and subordinate minoritized men, women, gender non-binary, and transgender persons. Located lower in the hierarchy are complicit masculinities (i.e., those that do not embody hegemonic masculine practices, but benefit from unequal gender relations), subordinate masculinities (i.e., "deviant" masculinities), and marginalized masculinities (i.e., trivialized masculinities based upon other status inequities; Messerschmidt, 2018). Key to this framework is the focus on dominant masculinities, which refer to forms of masculinity that do not always embody hegemonic practices but are often socially located in groups of men with a shared interest or social position.

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Such a framework provides a useful tool of analysis for investigating incels both as individuals and as a social group, as the pretense of the incels' shared identity places them within the subordinated classes of the gender hierarchy. The findings of this study aims to illuminate the discursive nature of hegemonic masculinity through incel behaviors, such as "shit-posting," while providing a broad overview of how incels make sense of their lived experiences. This paper uses data derived from interviews with 10 men who regularly engage with various incel outlets online and also self-identify as incels. While previous studies have utilized linguistic analyses to assess incel rhetoric found in online sources (e.g., Farrell et al., 2019; Ging, 2019; Jones, 2020; Lindsay, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020; O'Malley et al., 2020; van Valkenburgh, 2018), this paper shifts the locus of analysis to dialogue with persons directly involved in the incelosphere.

Literature Review

The History of Inceldom

An involuntary celibate (i.e., incel) is generally defined by members of its community as a "person who desires, but is unable to be in a romantic relationship" (Ash, 2019, p. 2). While the incel community is relatively new, the notion of inceldom as a situation—marked by sexual and social frustration—is not. It has been described in the literature as early as the 1700s (Doyle, 2019). Additionally, research on similar situations, coined "loveshyness" or Shy Man syndrome by psychologist Brian Gilmartin, addressed many of the social and romantic affiliations that plague many current incels (see Gilmartin, 1987). More commonly known are the early discussions of involuntary celibacy that can be traced back to a discussion board created in the late 1990s titled "Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project." Founded by a female undergraduate student, the purpose of the board was to create a safe space for those who found themselves unable to obtain or maintain sexual relationships (Taylor, 2018). As such, the chat room was open to anyone regardless of their gender, race, or sexual orientation.

One early study assessing users of online involuntary celibacy discussion boards indicated that the users were relatively diverse, including both men and women (roughly one quarter of participants being women), as well as persons who identified as a number of different racial and sexual identities (Donnelly et al., 2001). Many of the users indicated that they believed their lack of sexual relations could be attributed to their physical characteristics and living/work arrangements. This lack of sexual experience, due to factors which they felt they had no control over, led to an overall sense of depression and negative self-confidence for incels on these discussion boards.

Although early inceldom may have been relatively gender-neutral, a shift in the discourse occurred during the mid-2000s through the early 2010s in which inceldom largely became a community for men who felt as though they were subordinated within the global masculine hierarchy. Table 1 offers a brief overview of common terms used within online incel communities.

With an estimation of over 100,000 incels scattered across multiple platforms (Ash, 2019), inceldom has found itself enmeshed within the larger "Manosphere," which includes groups such as the Men's Rights Movement, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), and the Pick Up Artists (PUA). Though the groups' ideologies and perspectives may diverge, and many are at odds with one another, collectively, these groups view themselves as the opposition to the feminist movement, which they believe victimizes and subordinates men (Ging, 2019). Nagle (2017) suggests that facets of the global Manosophere emerged in direct response to feminism citing the 1990s backlash against second-wave feminism and highlighting the critique of traditional conceptualizations of men and masculinity. She argues,

Table 1 Brief List of Incel Terms and Definitions Discussed

Term	Definition
BlackPill(ed)	The acceptance of scientific evidence that looks are the most important factor in mating and attraction; BlackPilled (adj.) used to describe one who accepts the BlackPill
Incel	A person who wants to be in a romantic relationship but is unable to do so; a member of the online incel community (or Incelosphere)
Incelosphere	The collection of online forums, communities, and other media (e.g., YouTube, etc.) to promote and share incel ideas and experiences
Manosphere	The collection of broader online communities or networks of websites and groups that focus on masculinity and men's experiences including Pick Up Artists, Men's Rights Activists, Men Going Their Own Way and more
NEET	Acronym for "Not Educated, Employed, or Trained"
SEAmaxx(ing)	Improving ones social and romantic situation by traveling to Southeast Asia (SEA), as women there may have lower standards and/or be more attracted to white men
Shit-post	Commenting or posting intentionally shocking or disturbing content for reactions or popularity on forums or social media sites

> While feminism has expanded and thrived online in recent years, so, too, has anti-feminist masculinist politics, which again developed in the context of evermore radical liberal gender politics and increasingly common anti-male rhetoric that went from obscure feminist online spaces to the mainstream (p. 86).

Bates (2020), however, references and subsequently dismisses other "superficial analyses" of incel communities as being a result of more class-driven policies such as shifting labor markets or the collective failure of "poor, white boys being left behind" (p. 7).

In terms of individual online behaviors, Phillips (2015) points to the notion of trolling (and more specifically, shitposting) having early roots in the late 1990s AOL chat rooms and, later, the 2003 development of 4chan. Largely, the Internet, including the creation of online communities on websites such as 4chan and Reddit, has allowed the Manosphere to proliferate over the 2010s (see, Farrell et al., 2019; Papadamou et al., 2020). While a description of each group's ideology is outside the scope of this paper, the concept of "RedPill" ideology is crucial in understanding incels and the Manosphere as a whole. Derived from a notably short scene in the 1999 film, *The Matrix*, RedPill ideology is described as an understanding of the true inner workings of society, in which society inherently favors women over men (Ging, 2019; Lindsay, 2020; van Valkenburgh, 2018). In contrast, the "BluePill" and those who adhere to it, choose to reject the truth of society and live their lives without truly knowing men's social marginalization and oppression (van Valkenburgh, 2018). The Manosphere posits that those who "take the RedPill" are then able to understand the ways in which men are socially oppressed and can alter their characteristics in a way which allows them to better their position in the social hierarchy.

Within the greater Manosphere, incels are unique as they view their physical, psychological, and emotional characteristics as a barrier to obtaining intimate relationships and sexual intimacy with women (Lindsay, 2020). As such, this has led many incels to adhere to a worldview which they have termed, "the BlackPill." Though there are a variety of interpretations and iterations of the perspective, BlackPill beliefs are often viewed as nihilistic in the sense that adherents believe that society is inherently "lookist," whereby women choose partners based on a particular set of physical characteristics and men who do not have these looks will fail to have sexual and intimate relationships with women (Ging, 2019). According to many incels, nothing is going to change this fact; therefore, one should accept that this is reality. As such, the BlackPill is biologically deterministic and portrays women (and socially dominant men) as the oppressors of society since they selectively choose men with certain physical characteristics for sexual relations (Ging, 2019; Lindsay, 2020).

In sum, a shift in involuntary celibacy discourse has taken place over the past few decades. While the online forums may have initially been a space for all persons who found themselves unable to obtain or maintain sexual relationships, this is no longer the case as many of the online spaces dedicated to inceldom are composed solely of men. Additionally, the initial rhetoric—which highlighted issues of professional success and physical characteristics as predictors of romantic and sexual success (Donnelly et al., 2001)—has now shifted to one that espouses more nihilistic and anti-feminist views (Ging, 2019; Lindsay, 2020). As such, the bulk of empirical work assessing the phenomenon has emphasized the gendered nature of inceldom. The following section provides an overview of the recent empirical studies which have attempted to provide a greater understanding of the incel experience through a gendered lens.

The Gendered Nature of Contemporary Inceldom

Using content analyses of websites such as Reddit (Høiland, 2019; Lindsay, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020) and incels.co (Jones, 2020; Lindsay, 2020), researchers have assessed how gender influences members of the incel collective. A recurring theme across the majority of analyses is incels' perception of "Chads," which is a term used to describe men who embody a form of masculinity (e.g., physically attractive, physically strong, financially wealthy, popular, has sex frequently) that is most desirable to women (Høiland, 2019; Jones, 2020; Lindsay, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020). Further, incels assume that "Chads" are desirable to every woman, and therefore are capable of having sex with any woman they desire.

To determine who is a "Chad," incels use a user-created rating system in which men are rated on a scale of 1 to 10 (Høiland, 2019; Jones, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020). While there is no universal standard used by forum members, it is generally assumed that "Chads" (who rate at the upper end of the scale) will have a strong bone structure in their face, be tall, and have a muscular build. Incels, on the other hand, frequently rate themselves on the lower end of the scale, often stating that they are devoid of these features, instead being under- or overweight, unattractive, and undesirable. To try and address these perceived inadequacies, some incels discuss the possibility of engaging in what they call *looksmaxxing*; whereby they engage in certain practices (i.e., receiving surgery or other body alterations) in an attempt to alter themselves to appear more "Chad-like" (Jones, 2020). However, the nihilistic nature of the BlackPill ideology prevents some incels from engaging in these practices, as they believe that even after the body modifications, they will never achieve the same level of sexual success as a true "Chad" (Maxwell et al., 2020), and remain subordinated within the gender hierarchy.

In addition to "Chads," incels have also coined the term "Stacy" for physically attractive, sexually successful women. A "Stacy" is a hypersexual woman who can engage in selective sexual relations due to her physical attractiveness (Jones, 2020; Lindsay, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020). As a result, these women are viewed as unattainable to incels, as their looks would never allow them to be viewed as a potential sexual partner. An interesting dialectic discussion occurs within the incel community, as "Stacys" are viewed as both the ultimate object of sexual desire, and an oppressive agent. While by definition "Stacys" are viewed as the "ultimate woman," incels often attempt to vilify women who embody this socially constructed identity. For instance, one study of a top Reddit post on r/Braincels (a now defunct subReddit dedicated to incels) found commenters posting responses indicating that all women are evil towards men, but "Stacys" are particularly deserving of criticism from incels as they are highly sexually successful (Lindsay, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020). Therefore, since "Stacys" are unattainable and oppressive, they are to be viewed by incels as an enemy not unlike "Chads." "Stacys," however, are a unique dichotomy in that they are highly desirable sex objects and many men's fantasy while also being a physical representation of their perceived oppression and the women they will never have.

Due to their subordination by both "Chads" and "Stacys," incels may make efforts to rally against these socially constructed identities in an effort to reclaim their manhood. Some self-proclaimed incels (such as the Toronto van attacker) have engaged in violent behavior as a means of heightening their masculine identity and pushing back against their oppressors (Witt, 2020). Believing themselves to be the inciting sparks of the "beta uprising" (beta referring to being a subordinated man; Ging, 2019), these attacks were meant to be viewed as the tipping point of inceldom, whereby the dominant gender groups would be overthrown. As discussed by Witt (2020), the Isla Vista shooter's killing of women and "Chads," followed by his suicide, functioned as a way to reclaim his lost masculinity. In particular, murdering his victims functioned as a way for him to affirm his patriarchal power over women, obtain an ultimate masculine status, and then die before anyone could take that power away from him. As such, violence can potentially function as a way for incels to reclaim their manhood. Such a claim has been supported in recent work which found that men who embody "incel traits" reported a higher likelihood of fantasizing about violence towards their enemies and rape (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020).

While attackers such as the Isla Vista shooter may be upheld as a sort of secularized saint in the eyes of some incels (Witt, 2020), it is important to note that the majority of incels do not commit acts of physical violence. Instead, many incels engage in an online practice called "shit-posting," where members of the community post memes or shocking comments which are meant to provoke members of society, such as "Chads," "Stacys," and the average person (deemed "normie"; Lindsay, 2020). Such shit-posts often include memes, such as "Chad Thundercock" and "The Stacy" (memes which serve as caricatures of both "Chads" and "Stacys"), both of which seek to provoke members of those social identities (Høiland, 2019). Additionally, when shared, they may also highlight incel talking points to those who are outside of the incel collective. While these posts may never actually be viewed by any "Chad" or "Stacy," they allow incels to generate their own dominant form of masculinity within incel-spaces.

Inceldom's hierarchical views of gender, as well as incels' efforts to reclaim their manhood, often lead researchers to utilize the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018) as the theoretical framework for their studies (Høiland, 2019; Jones, 2020; Lindsay, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020; Witt, 2020). While these studies indeed focus on the hierarchical nature of masculinity, as posited by Connell (1987, 2005), they overlook the more nuanced nature of hegemonic masculinity as discussed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Messerschmidt (2018). Failing to account for all aspects of the theory undermines its explanatory capability and often leaves the phenomenon of study underexplored.

Specifically, these studies overwhelmingly omit the *relational* aspects of hegemonic masculinity which *legitimate* unequal gender relationships. As discussed in more recent updates to the theory (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018), hegemonic masculinity cannot exist without the subordinated masculine classes (i.e., subordinated masculinities must be present in society for there to be a hegemonic masculinity). Thus far, at least within the context of incel research, this facet of the theory has not been examined. For instance, Maxwell et al.'s (2020) assessment of a comment thread in r/Braincels showed that incels construct "Chads" as the dominant masculinity within society, but their assessment does not detail how this process actually upholds hegemonic masculinity within society. Similar presentations of gender are found across a number of other studies (Høiland, 2019; Jones, 2020; Lindsay, 2020). Indeed, such presentations are important, but there is much more to be learned by accounting for the relational and legitimating aspects of these processes, as well as how they function within various levels of society (i.e., the local, national, and global; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018).

Additionally, many studies are limited in their capability to fully assess the incel experience, as they rely heavily on data gathered from incel forums and web domains (Ging, 2019; Høiland, 2019; Jones, 2020; Lindsay, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020). For one, data collected from online resources calls into question the forum poster's membership

to the incel community. While websites such as incels.co require members to create an account and be approved to post, other internet spaces, such as Reddit, allow anyone to post a comment or create a thread even if they are not subscribed to that specific subReddit. As such, individuals from outside of the community may post comments or create threads in an attempt to subvert or stir up conflict within the community (Jones, 2020). Second, internet posts may not fully represent the lived experiences of community members. Assessments of internet data may allow for a better understanding of group discourse, but they do not fully showcase the complexity of incels themselves (Jones, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020).

Finally, the use of content analysis limits the breadth and depth of information that can be collected. As some websites allow for users to post completely anonymously, there is no way for researchers to follow up with or probe for more information from the participant. This limitation ultimately restricts the explanatory power of the data and only allows for a surface-level assessment of the phenomenon (Patton, 1999, 2015). Qualitative methods, such as interviews with members of the community, allow researchers to discuss lived experiences with their participants and generate more fully-fledged themes.

This study aims to account for the limitations of current research through the use of open-ended interviews with incel-identified men, during which participants relayed their life experiences and worldviews. As such, this study is the first known work to report findings from direct interactions with incels to inductively generate themes which better illuminate the lived experiences of those who identify as an incel. Additionally, this study more fully realizes the concepts of hegemonic masculinity by focusing on the hierarchical nature of manhood discussed by participants, as well as paying close attention to the ways in which members of the the incel community reiterate hegemonic masculinity through discursive practices.

Method

The study guidelines and procedures were approved by an Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. Participants were recruited using social media and email contacts. Most were identified as incels through their replies to popular incel Twitter users, and the first author contacted them via a tweet or direct message to invite them to participate in an interview. When they replied, the researcher provided them with information about the study and her goals and explained the consent form. All participants consented to take part in the research and agreed that any quotes and information gathered from the interviews could be used for research and writing purposes. Participants had the opportunity to create pseudonyms and only provided demographic information if they felt comfortable doing so, as the researcher wanted to ensure maximum privacy protection.

All participants completed the initial interview questions via social media messaging or Discord calls and many of the conversations via messaging platforms lasted several weeks or months. For those who completed the questions on social media messaging, the researcher provided a list of questions, and the respondents offered their initial answers for each before continuing into a less-structured discussion based on the topics of their choosing. These were typically the conversations that lasted longer, as the respondents often contacted the researcher based on ideas they had or something they remembered they wanted to share. The lead author then compiled all the messages into a single Word document for later analysis.

Participants on Discord calls answered each question as the researcher posed it. These calls were recorded (with each participants' consent) and then transcribed. Some participants on Discord calls also later contacted the researcher via social media message or Discord messenger, again with additional thoughts or insights they wanted to share.

Based on information provided, the average age of participants was 23.6 ($N = 10$). Four participants lived in the United States, four lived in Europe, one lived in Australia, and the other declined to share his location. Many of the participants were reluctant to give additional information about themselves, including their race/ethnicity, but they are all presumably heterosexual, as most incels believe that homosexual men cannot be true incels (based on stereotypical notions of the hypersexual gay community; Ging, 2019). Consistent with discussions on saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Grady, 1998; Legard et al., 2003; Saunders et al., 2018), when the responses and the interview data reached redundancy around the eighth and ninth interview, an additional interview was conducted to confirm data saturation and probe for new information. Ultimately, the researcher felt that each participants' views had been fully examined, With data saturation determined, the decision was made to begin the coding process, rather than continuing with sampling and interviewing.

The current study employed a phenomenological approach in order to better understand the lived experiences of those who identify as incels. Phenomenology, as a research methodology, aims to target people who have experience with the specific phenomenon of study (De Chesnay, 2014; Moustakas, 1994), in this case members of the incelosphere. Chatfield (2018) asserted that phenomenological methods use thorough, comprehensive data from a smaller number of participants. While the sample size is notably small, we contend that it is sufficient for interviewing a generally hidden population (i.e., one who may "actively try to conceal their group identity" for any number of reasons; Shaghaghi et al., 2011, p. 87), and it

is also consistent with Creswell's (1998) recommendation for five to 25 interviews for phenomenological studies.

The current research design used semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions with members of the community. Open-ended questions are beneficial in exploratory research, as they largely allow for participants to focus the conversation on topics important to them (Patton, 2015). As recommended by Beech et al. (2005), the researcher utilized open-ended questions and tried to avoid any leading questions or ones that would elicit a simple yes–no responses. The interviews generally aimed to allow participants to discuss issues about which they were passionate and asked ten initial questions that were intentionally broad and were as follows:

1. What does it mean for you to be an incel?
2. Do you visit online forums for incels? If so, what does it do for you?
3. [For those on social media]: You're pretty vocal on Twitter about your perspectives and experiences. How do you think this aids in helping people understand incels?
4. What do you think are the factors that led to your inceldom?
5. What would you need to improve your situation?
6. How do you feel about the way that the media portrays incels?
7. I see a lot of people mocking or bullying incels on social media. How does this affect you?
8. What does the BlackPill mean to you?
9. What is the biggest misconception about the BlackPill?
10. What else do you want people to know about incels and your own experiences?

All interviews were transcribed and then reviewed and coded in a manner consistent with the thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). According to Chatfield (2018), "…it is imprecise and perhaps misleading [to use the term 'themes emerged'], suggesting an uncontrolled or even magical process" (p. 132). To avoid this, we clearly outline the three-stage coding process and the development of the themes. In the first stage of coding, the lead author assessed each transcript to immerse herself in the data and assess for quality information regarding the participants' experiences with inceldom. Next, the lead author, along with two trained coders, read through each transcript, assessing narratives regarding social processes associated with inceldom (e.g., comparison to others, treatment by society, online behavior).

In the second stage of coding, narratives were then synthesized to generate the themes as presented herein. The trustworthiness and validity of the findings were ensured through detailed conversations among the three coders (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Padgett, 2008). All emergent themes were discussed and agreed upon by each coder to ensure that the specific quotes were representative of the respective theme. In the third stage of coding, the three coders assessed the narratives for background characteristics (e.g., loneliness, depression, failure to obtain intimate relationships) that influenced the participants' life experiences regarding their pathways to and involvement with inceldom as a whole.

The three coders then read through each transcript again, coding the documents for direct quotes from the interviews that reflected the five themes. Using the McAlister et al.'s (2017) approach, the coders independently highlighted representative quotes using the comment function in Microsoft Word. Upon completion, the lead author extracted the comments/themes using a macro (Fredborg, 2013), which collected the themes in a table that included the coder, the page and line number, the code, and the text. The lead author tallied the agreements for each theme, and then divided it by total the number of codes in the theme, resulting in an inter-rater reliability that reflects "the fractional percent of codes that agree" (McAlister et al., 2017, p. 5). These percentages along with the themes from the data are included in Table 2.

The positionality of the research team is important in all qualitative methodologies (McCorkel & Meyers, 2003; Naples, 2003). As a feminist research team, our ideologies and beliefs often conflicted with those of the participants and more specifically, larger incel notions. To account for this potential subjectivity, we regularly met to discuss the emergent themes in an effort to account for our own biases. Through this process, we were able to better account for our subjective perceptions and provide findings which were representative of the participants themselves. Additionally, all participants were provided drafts of the manuscript to ensure that their quotes were used in a manner representative of their beliefs and not those of the researchers (Chatfield, 2018; De Chesnay, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). While our beliefs as self-identified feminist scholars do not align with some of the themes and quotes presented herein, the presented findings offer important insights into members of the incel community and their overall worldview.

Results

Analysis of the interview data led to the generation of five themes detailing the incel experience. While distinct from one another, these themes each indicated that their own understanding of gender and relationships influenced the participants' experiences and worldviews. The following themes are all presented in turn: masculinity challenges, subhuman status and social rejection, the BlackPill,

Table 2 Descriptions of Themes of Interviews with Incel Participants

Theme	Definition	Codes	Prototypical Example
Masculinity Challenges (IRR = 94%)	Struggles to prove their manhood through interpersonal, sexual, or intimate relationships	Manliness, milestones, expectations, relationships	"There will always be a portion of men in society who go empty, who are not considered good enough…to engage in a sexual romantic relationship." (K)
Subhuman Status and Social Rejection (IRR = 84%)	Perceived negative treatment due to any number of factors and masculinity challenges	Mistreatment, bullying, mockery, consequences, effects	"I think most of society hates us. They think I'm a weirdo for being an incel…[I] would love to be normal and respected, but that's not going to happen." (Steven)
The BlackPill (IRR = 90%)	The belief that society is 'lookist' and subordinates those who do not meet the physical and social standards put forth by society	Science, appearance, standards, outlook, ideology, nihilism,	"It's a set of propositions that looks are the most important factor in romantic success. Your looks are objective." (Mark)
Shit-Posting and the Discourse of Masculinity (IRR = 100%)	Use of violent, misogynistic, racist, or generally unacceptable rhetoric on forums or social media	Forums, online behavior, posts	"I think incels shit-post [because] it's kind of 'any attention is good attention' thing. You see that with depressed people a lot." (Simon)
Perceived Effects of Inceldom (IRR = 83%)	Negative emotions as a result of inceldom and personal experiences	Emotions, sadness, grief, loneliness	"No one can hardly accept the fate of inceldom. It's over or it's miracle." (Ignas)

IRR inter-rater reliability

Table 3 Interviewees and Themes

Name	Age	Masculinity Challenges	Subhuman	BlackPill	Shit-Posting	Depression
Decline	27	•		•		•
Frail	29	•	•	•	•	•
Ignas	20	•	•	•	•	•
James FT	31	•		•		
John*	30	•			•	
K	27	•	•	•	•	•
Mark*	28			•		•
Alexander				•	•	
Simon*	23	•	•	•	•	•
Steven*	21	•	•	•	•	•
Note. Average age = 23.6		8 (80%)	5 (50%)	9 (90%)	7 (70%)	7 (70%)

*Participant based in the United States

shit-posting, and perceived effects of inceldom. Table 3 displays the participants whose narratives led to the generation of the theme, presented in Table 2.

Masculinity Challenges

Many interviewees viewed themselves as unsatisfactory or insufficient to engage in the dating game or romantic marketplace ($n = 8$). This theme, labeled as "masculinity challenges," is conceptualized as participants' struggles to prove their manhood through interpersonal, sexual, or intimate relationships. This theme emphasized their inadequate physical appearance, mental health issues, and/or personality shortcomings. As explained by K (age 27), the standards or traits that they perceived as being necessary to find romantic partnership are clearly based on broader cultural expectations:

> In Europe and North America, if you just look unattractive, if you are short, if you wear shitty clothes, or if you are autistic, and you do not behave like an extremely charismatic person, you are immediate [*sic*] dropped like a rotten fruit especially online where if you do not look good enough, you are just left out of the playing field.

Here, he focused on height and appearance as being necessary to engage in relationships.

In addition to appearance and personality, the lack of sexual experience that is often related to practices of doing gender for men (West & Zimmerman, 1987) was noted. For Steven (age 21), his status as a virgin and the comparison with sex-having men was a problem for him, and he reported:

> …other men laugh at guys who are virgins. For me, being a virgin is very embarrassing. People think you must be gay if you never had sex yet. I see guys online bragging about all the sex they will have, and it triggers me lol [*sic*] because I will never have it like the normal guys.

Steven's comparison to "the normal guys" imparts the notion that having sex is an expected part of masculine identities, whereas Mark (age 28) describes a different view of incels:

> I've heard people say that incels aren't really looking for companionship, that they're looking for social capital or that they want to be seen a certain way or a certain view of masculinity. That they could brag and be the person who gets a girlfriend. While that may be the motivation for some, I think it's weird that some people can't believe that some just want to do it because they're lonely. They have to make it into something more sinister.

Comparing Mark and Steven's views, we see that there can be multiple facets to the notion of engaging in relationships and having sex. While Mark believed that some incels may be more concerned with participating in standard practices that validate gender, he indicated that the desire for companionship and a relationship is more so rooted in incels' individual loneliness. However, Steven, who repeatedly emphasized feelings of loneliness and depression, focused more on the comparison between him and other men. His status as an outsider from the group of "normal guys" further highlights the challenges of his situation.

K, however, considers larger society and changing social expectations and norms as well as cultural and behavioral practices as explanations for incels' problems. He compared past practices of monogamy and marriages historically and considered these issues in a broader, more macro-level approach:

> As monogamy gets more unpopular and less people get married, you have more and more bachelors, more

> and more single people. And back then if you had 50 men and 50 women, every man had one woman, and at that moment they were out of the dating game. But nowadays, basically, let's say you have 5 men and the other 45 men are left out because the women do not consider them worldly enough. The other 50 women are copulating or only engaging with the 5 men.

K's belief that the majority of women are competing for a small percentage of men is not uncommon among incel discussions, and K (and others) examine society and dating interactions as a potential explanation for the problems that incels face.

While K chose to examine the changing nature of marriage and monogamy, Steven explicitly placed the focus on himself rather than women, saying, "I don't hate women for not dating me. I can't blame them. Why would they date an ugly man?" Though seemingly different views, K's belief mirrors that of Steven's in one way. While Steven constantly compared himself to "normal" men, K considered the same issues, simply in broader proportions. When compared to men who are engaged in dating and relationships, K feels like an outsider and said, "Society needs to realize that there [are those] who will be on the sidelines and will not be able to engage with the other sex and [they] have feelings, too. Those people have needs, too." Steven is one of these men on the sidelines, despite the difference of his own self-blame compared to K's focus on women as those who are setting the standards.

The masculinity challenges that the participants described reinforce Connell's (1987) notion of marginalized masculinities. Messerschmidt (2018) describes them as being "trivialized and/or discriminated against because of unequal relations external to gender relations, such as class, race, ethnicity, and age" (p. 29). While many would argue that incels are treated poorly and/or marginalized as a result of their association with the incel community, our findings highlight the ways that their features and characteristics fall squarely outside of the dominant masculinities. Specifically, the interviewees point to their stature, physical features, and neuro-atypicality as being the reason for their marginalization, which has long been recognized as an ongoing pattern in masculinity research (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Eight of the participants discussed masculinity challenges (though not all were included due to repetition and for the sake of brevity), and the frequency with which the interviewees—as well as the content found on incel forums (Jones, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020; Menzie, 2020) that discussed this marginalization—makes it clear that the dominant masculinity found in incel-spaces is one of marginalization and oppression by physically attractive, sexually successful persons and social movements, which have made efforts to generate social capital for traditionally non-privileged social groups (e.g., #MeToo, the women's movement, feminism overall). The perceived standards set by these "oppressors" lead to a number of masculine challenges which incels feel that they cannot rectify.

Subhuman Status and Social Rejection

Half of the interviewees ($n = 5$) discussed their experiences of being perceived and treated as "subhuman" (Steven). Due to their masculinity challenges—primarily their facial appearance, but also as a result of other immutable characteristics such as height or an autism diagnosis—they feel as though they are treated as "subhumans." Hence, this theme is conceptualized as perceived negative treatment due to any number of factors and masculinity challenges.

As Frail (age 29), explained, "[I want] to be treated like a human being and not as less than a dog. A walking disease." His experiences included being mocked in public for his appearance, but he also noted that he has observed other ways that people express disdain about this appearance, even if they do not address it directly:

> I've had people do that [mock my appearance] since childhood TBH. It's annoying but never put me off, I got used to it. I just thought it was one of those things that happened for the longest time. Also, because I saw it happened on TV, where people would be chastised or joked about because of their looks...Most wouldn't dream of actually saying it but their body language and behavior shows it.

Similarly, Steven acknowledged the belief that his height affects other people's perceptions of him and other short men. He explained, "what bothers me and other guys I know on here. We hate being short. Society thinks short guys are just weak losers…they always get mocked or rejected for that. People make us feel like we're little kids, not men." Many of the men drew on their own personal experiences of being ostracized or shunned, and they described either feeling specifically targeted or overlooked.

Frail and Steven's responses reflect the March 2020 incels.co survey in which 71% of respondents reported being bullied during their childhood, and 83% believed they had been discriminated against due to their appearance. Although they may suffer from additional problems due to their identification as incels, their problems with their physical appearance have likely occurred throughout their lives. Not all participants reported direct bullying, though. Simon (age 23) did not describe a bullying experience, but rather simply being ignored or overlooked, which led to negative feelings. When discussing his past, he described, "I've always been someone nobody notices. I'm not sure if

I'm used to [being] alone but loneliness eats away and [*sic*] you and it's very difficult to deal with."

Although these stories highlight prior experiences, the treatment seems to be compounded once they identify themselves as incels and align with the broader community. Though many respondents find it comforting to participate in this community and engage with others who have experienced similar challenges, the belonging and self-identification creates new opportunities for subordination and negative treatment. As K explained, "we are a legit target for everyone, basically," and others, including Steven, echoed the sentiment. He found the label and their ideas, particularly the BlackPill (elaborated on more fully in the following theme), as a way to understand his situation, but he recognized that it did not improve his situation. He stated:

> It's so fucking depressing for me to see how society treats us [incels]…They think I'm a weirdo for being an incel. They think I want to be a Incel [*sic*] and that's so wrong because no man wants to be a Incel.

Steven's statement highlights the complexity of the incel problem. These men experience negative outcomes (seemingly as a result of their appearance) and are treated poorly or ignored. Thus, they seek social support from other individuals experiencing the same treatment. Incel forums provide a refuge from this rejection as they promote a dominant form of masculinity within that positions non-incel persons (e.g., Chads, Stacys), as well as social movements such as feminism, as the oppressive agents and incels as the victims of such oppression. Though some solace is found in being a self-identified incel who is now part of a community, by joining an already stigmatized incel forum—or assuming the label to find support, friends, or comfort—they further solidify their treatment as subhuman and as a marginalized group. While perceiving oneself as a victim is not necessarily the mainstream (or hegemonic notion) of masculinity, for incels, it seems that their victimization is, in fact, a badge of honor which becomes the dominant form of masculinity within incel groups. This status, combined with the mockery and criticism of Chads and Stacys, allows them to reclaim their masculinity by creating a new status based on shared experiences.

The BlackPill: Science, Lookism, and Acceptance of their Status

This theme is conceptualized as the belief that society is 'lookist' and subordinates those who do not meet the physical and social standards put forth by society. Incels'experiences and perceptions converge with scientific examples can ultimately lead to the BlackPill. On incel forums and in interviews, incels often share proof (both experiential and empirical) to emphasize the importance of one's appearance in romantic and interpersonal success. Thus, the BlackPill is a three-step process: it is not only the belief that looks matter most, but also the use of scientific evidence (and individual experiences) to support the ideology which ultimately leads to internalization and acceptance of their fate.

In his book, *Why Incels are Right and You are Wrong,* an anonymous author notes of the BlackPill, "[it] essentially states that our dating choices are based off of pure biological determinism" (Castle, 2019, p. 58). Although, there are a variety of interpretations of the BlackPill, Frail defined it as:

> …a set of facts, studies, data/info [at its core]. Sociology, evolutionary, biological, societal aspects that explain human behavior, attitudes, dating/meeting strategies, preferences and the reactions to such.

Some assert that the BlackPill simply means "it's over and there's nothing incels can do to change," thus leading people to assume that it is a modern representation of nihilism, or, at the very least, a profoundly pessimistic outlook. In an incels.co survey (Incel.co, 2020), 95% of respondents reported that the BlackPill is accurate in describing society.

Nine of the interviewees discussed the BlackPill, and eight reported it as being an honest representation of what they currently experience and have observed throughout their lives. For them, these studies (as referenced by Frail) affirmed the importance of appearance in dating and romantic relationships to explain and justify their difficulty. For some, it also appeared to provide a moment of clarity or awakening, though, it may also lead to despair or hopelessness. Ignas (age 20) described:

> I strongly believe in it and it gives me clear signs and awareness of what the world really is, specifically the dating and relationship world. From that truth, I believe I will have a future in [*sic*] career and job, but in terms of dating, relationship, and sexual success, I would need a miracle which means a girls [*sic*] would like my looks (1), I would need to maximize my looks by leg lengthening surgery or similar things (2), or I would need to accept years of loneliness (no romantic and sexual companion) for the rest of my life (3).

The BlackPill, in that sense, is a belief supported by selective empirical evidence which highlights that attractiveness and hegemonic constructions of masculinity are important elements of dating and relationships. The studies and references that incels use to support their BlackPill notions are often summarized in mainstream media articles (see, Cook, 2017; Fors, 2019), and they often share these types of links on incel forums. Other incels present studies published in academic journals (see, Currie & Little, 2009; Oh et al., 2020). While the more nuanced elements of the studies (such as the

conceptualization of variables like attractiveness or methodological differences) may be lost on non-academic readers, incels often use the summaries of the findings to affirm the BlackPill and assert that attractiveness and physical features lead to more romantic success. With a lack of scientific training, most incels make little effort to seek out methodologically sound research on attractiveness and dating. Instead, most incels favor a brief readthrough of the results with an assumption that it can be generalized and applied to all of society (see, for example, Furby, 2018, a mainstream news article reporting on Bruch & Newman, 2018).

James FT (age 31), a YouTube personality who frequently advocates for SEAmaxxing (traveling to Southeast Asia to find romantic relationships) and plastic surgery, said:

> I'm BlackPilled to the bone. Most of the people who know me say that I'm really BlackPilled. It has nothing to do with being negative. For me, I only believe in the scientific BlackPill...it's all about how looks determine the majority of a man's dating success.

In referencing himself as BlackPilled (the adjective form of the Blackpill, used to describe oneself as aligning with BlackPill beliefs), James FT believed that physical attractiveness is the primary determinant of romantic relationships.

Simon was explicit in his notion of the BlackPill as nihilistic, though he explained his path to this perspective (notably, at the time of this writing, Simon no longer considers himself an incel):

> I'm very unsure whether or not my situation is temporary. I know I'm only 23 and I have my whole life ahead of me, but it kind of feels like I've no choice in the matter. Kind of think I don't have free will anymore…I think the forum makes me more BlackPilled on 'love' and 'romance'…but am I BlackPilled? I'd say I'm a nihilist, and nihilism is a subset of BlackPilled, so yeah.

He, like others, has adopted the BlackPill perspective as leading him to a situation which he feels he has no control over. If, as the empirical evidence they use to underscore the scientific BlackPill asserts, a man's appearance is the primary predictor of sex and successful relationships, this leaves many incels with the understanding that there is little they can do to change their situations without plastic surgery.

This facet of incel ideology, where physical attractiveness is seen as the key to sexual success, is reminiscent of a greater body of literature focused on objectification. Largely, this perspective argues that bodies, typically female bodies, are stripped of their individuality and treated as an object of pleasure to be used by others (Bartky, 1990; Calogero et al., 2014; Nussbaum, 1995). As the process of objectification is social in nature, some individuals may wish to pursue body modification options (e.g., plastic surgery) as a means of making themselves appear more sexually desirable (Calogero et al., 2014). Within the context of incels, herein and elsewhere it has been indicated that "Chads" are seen as the objective standard of physical attractiveness for men (Høiland, 2019; Jones, 2020; Lindsay, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020; Menzie, 2020). Knowing that they do not meet these standards, some incels may view plastic surgery and other body modification options as a means of transcending their perceived unattractiveness. Plastic surgery and other methods of body modification are costly though and may not be affordable options to most members of the incel community. Therefore, having tried to succeed socially and romantically throughout their lives with no luck, and with the prospect of plastic surgery or major changes unlikely, the BlackPill simultaneously offers a shift in perspective while reinforcing notions of a bleak future.

Steven created a series of YouTube videos discussing his BlackPill perspectives, often ending with "it's over," but his depression and loneliness also seem in direct contrast to his stated appreciation of the notion, which he claimed has liberated him. He stated:

> The BlackPill saved me because before I was BlackPilled, I always felt depressed, but after the BlackPill, I feel happy, and I feel free now because I don't need to worry about getting a girlfriend anymore and no more getting rejected by women for my looks.

His assertion that he felt "happy" and "free" does not necessarily align with his earlier comments and bleak outlook, but he claimed that the BlackPill, and its utilization of empirical evidence, made him realize that the odds of a successful relationship were slim, and thus he simply accepted his fate and stopped trying. Moreover, he described how it was beneficial for him:

> I used the BlackPill for my advantage, making BlackPilled YouTube videos. Before I took the BlackPill I never wanted to show my face on video. Now I don't care anymore because I embraced my ugly look.

Of particular note is that the scientific studies which lead to the BlackPill perspective focus on the physical attributes of men rather than the relational or social interactions that also define and shape sexuality, but—combined with their recognition of their own personality limitations—this becomes an important part in understanding the notion of "doing" sex and gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

From these interviews, it appears that those who subscribe to the BlackPill have reached a point of acknowledging that lookism exists and that there may be little they can do to address their situations. Although members of the incel community are often painted as being frighteningly nihilistic or fatalistic, there appears to be notable diversity of thought among the interviewees.

Frail recognized that no matter what he did (e.g., leaving the incel community, making changes in his life), he will likely continue to be treated poorly as a result of his appearance. This acceptance led him to engage in self-destructive behavior, and he expected that he would likely not live much longer. He uses alcohol, drugs, and the Internet, and describes them as "Pretty much all I have left to cope with." Other incels, however, are skeptical or apprehensive, but not as committed to the notion that there is no chance. When asked if his situation is temporary or permanent, Mark reflected and replied, "I hope it's not permanent. I don't think I'll ever *not* struggle [italics added], but I totally haven't given up yet." Another interviewee, Decline (age 27) explained: "I don't think I'll fully accept that there's no way out. I'm not at the stage where I've accepted my situation. I still hold out hope that I'll find my way out. I have to."

Likewise, K recognized that he is at something of a crossroads. Having once been profoundly lonely, depressed, and suicidal before turning to SEAmaxxing, he sees that as something of a solution. His friendship with YouTube personality James FT provided him with friendship, a plan to ascend, and, it seems, inspiration. James FT, though BlackPilled, is not nihilistic, but rather encouraging of people taking action. He argues:

> I'm really critical of the echo chamber of incels who just constantly yell at each other that it's over...and that there's nothing they can do. Sometimes you see people say that…but if I actually talk to them or sometimes, I see pictures of their face or we video call, I see that it's far from over for them...They're not that unattractive. They have a lot of paths to success that they haven't exercised yet.

In addition to advocating for SEAmaxxing, James FT, fueled by the BlackPill, is a fervent believer in plastic surgery for men and regularly discusses his own procedures on his YouTube channel. In our interview, he openly admitted to having a rhinoplasty ten years ago, and then two hair transplants over the course of two years. He is a uniquely positive figure in the world of incels and he seems to have positively influenced some, including K, who then described his situation and outlook in the following manner:

> I'm at one point where I know I'm an incel, okay. I will either ascend and escape inceldom or I will kill myself…I'm fed up doing what is called 'lay down and rot' meaning you just accept – not just accept your fate, but you just rot, you just suffer, you just prolong the suffering of your existence, basically...In my humble opinion, I should either ascend or I should end it.

There are certainly other tropes that people offer men who claim to be incels (see, Costello, 2020), but many are insulting to them or do not necessarily address what incels believe to be the root of the problem. For example, Ignas argued that a romantic relationship would require a miracle or a significant change in his height. Like James FT, he noted that he believes in the BlackPill and when he asks what it would take to succeed in relationships, he responded, "I would need to maximize my looks by leg lengthening surgery or similar things." He also rejected therapy as a treatment for the effects of this realization, because, as he stated:

> No matter how many times incels go to see [a] therapist, they'd still be sexually unattractive, and that's the core problem from my views. [A] therapist can play the part of listeners [*sic*], just so incels can cope, but not to end their real problems.

In some sense, the BlackPill may be a manifestation of individual incels' own realization and understanding of the notions of hegemonic masculinity. They view themselves as being ostracized or excluded due to their physical or mental (e.g., autism or depression diagnoses) shortcomings, and they clearly understand that they are part of a marginalized masculinity. As K explains of himself and other incels, "It's just these mental health issues…mostly autism [that] just debilitates them socially on a communication level." The BlackPill, and the science used by incels to support it, can function as a source of inspiration for some, leading them to the notion that they must change specific characteristics about themselves to "ascend" inceldom or, alternatively, position themselves within dominant masculinities (i.e., the more red-pilled dominant masculinity found across incel-spaces). For others, though, they view the BlackPill as a harsh realization that their situation will not change and that they will forever remain marginalized.

Shit-Posting and the Discourse of Masculinity

This theme was conceptualized as incels' use of violent, misogynistic, racist, or generally unacceptable rhetoric on forums or social media. Ging's (2019) research examined the ways that "beta males may position themselves through radically different discursive practices in their online and offline lives" (p. 643). This and other research highlights the fluid nature of masculinities and how the Internet has, over time, affected the relational and discursive elements perpetuating gender inequality and has blurred the lines of local, regional, and global categories (Messerschmidt, 2018). There is undoubtedly value in studying the processes by which incels, in their online discussions, construct "dominant masculinities" through their language and interactions in their online discussions.

Different from hegemonic masculinities, dominant masculinities exert power and authority and are celebrated among the group, but, as Messerschmidt (2018) explained,

"do not *in and of themselves* reproduce unequal gender relations" (p. 78). While dominant masculinities can be hegemonic by nature in some instances (for instance, the general acceptance of wife-beating in colonial America, Straus et al., 2007), they can generally be viewed as the most commonly accepted forms of masculinity within a space. For incels, the process of engaging in shit-posting, as well as posting messages and images aligned with incel ideology on their forums, allows for them to generate a localized, dominant masculinity online. While incel men may feel marginalized in greater society, shit-posting provides the mechanism for them to construct a masculine community which is accepting of who they are as an individual. This specific masculinity is not accepted by, nor does it have much of an impact on, society at-large, but it functions as the building block for identity work and interactions within incel spaces. As such, the interviewees' explanations of shit-posting are a crucial piece of understanding not only the online, discursive interaction of incel communities, but also of how individual incels view the language and vitriol that is arguably one of the primary reasons for backlash against the group.

Based on prior research, it was expected that anti-feminist language would be a major discussion point for participants. Instead, most participants wished to share their lived experiences with being a self-identified incel and how they navigated the identity on a daily basis. Across all topics, discussions of anti-feminism only appeared as participants discussed shit-posting. These discussions were not directly focused on anti-feminism in the moment, but rather how some incels draw upon such discourses situationally to get foster anger, frustration, and discomfort from non-incel identified persons.

While seven of the respondents discussed shit-posting in some form, their opinions or reasoning about the topic varied. Some respondents ($n=3$) described the violent, shocking, or "edgy" threats (i.e., shit-posting) as a manifestation of anger. Simon speculated, "Most people who [shit-post] are usually very pissed within the moment…that's the worst part about social media…it's very…reactionary." Ignas echoed the same thoughts, but prefaced his explanation with the recognition that the posts are inappropriate or indefensible:

> There's no way to defend that it's right to post such things. But I can tell you this. [An incel forum is] a place used as a means of coping by incels. When people get angry, many of them shout and swears [*sic*]. Even some of them punch the wall and break things up. Those are the equivalent of shitposting. Some incels channel their anger and sadness by posting those things as an outlet.

He also described his perceptions of people's reactions, and he explained that those posts and discussions are used against incels, saying, "people [tell] us 'this is why you're incel' when incels express anger after [people] mock them." Likewise, Frail described people's reactions (and, from his perspective, overreactions) and used the responses to shit-posting to point out his BlackPill mentality. He explained:

> There's [*sic*] false flaggers as well, but a lot of users don't really seem to care if it makes them look bad. They're resigned to the fact that we will be hated regardless. Some people do it to intentionally get a rise out of people, some just because it's the [*sic*] dark sense of humour….people take a lot of it too literally.

Simon echoed Frail's statement about using vitriolic posts to get a reaction, but he described it as attention-seeking behavior. He said, "…on the idea of attention, I think a lot of incels shit post for that reason. It's a kind of 'any attention is good attention' thing. You see that with depressed people a lot."

One of the primary forums outlines specific types of posts that will result in a user ban, such as discussion of illegal activities. As an admin and moderator, Alexander Ash (no age provided) recognizes the ways that controversial or incendiary language can be rewarded on the internet. He described it as:

> …a matter of the way communication happens nowadays. You go on Twitter, and you see someone post something interesting and it barely gets any retweets or likes. If you post something inflammatory...it rapidly gets retweeted or liked.

On his forum, in particular, he admitted that there are users who post concerning content, but he strives to balance freedom of speech and adherence to the rules. He, along with the other moderators, address the hundreds of bans and ban appeals. Alexander Ash did note, however, that "you have a few people who are extreme…and they eventually get banned…but they get upvoted to the top," and those threads and posts are "cherry picked because that's what everyone sees, but the rational ones go into oblivion." According to Alexander Ash, the most vile or shocking posts are those that are screenshotted and shared on other sites or Reddit threads.

This is perhaps one of the most interesting yet concerning elements of the incel community that has, as previously mentioned, garnered the most attention from researchers. However, through a hegemonic masculinity framework, the use and function of shit-posting allows us to understand the ways in which "'masculinity' represents not a certain type of man, but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 841). While incels note that shit-posting is an expressive form of frustration, it may also be a reflection of discursive interactions used to create or construct a dominant masculinity within their own online communities. In doing so, they can, as Messerschmidt (2018) explains, "adopt hegemonic

masculinity when it is desirable…but distance themselves strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments" (p. 41).

The vile messaging that Alexander Ash mentioned speaks to this discursive process. When vile posts are made in private incel spaces, they function as a sort of echo chamber for the dominant localized masculinity. As Alexander Ash states, attempts are made to remove these extreme posts (often containing anti-feminist, misogynistic, or violent messaging; Jones, 2020), but they are often upvoted making their way to the top of the forum before they can be deleted. He explains,

> Stupidity gets upvoted. Even in our forum, people who say things like, 'all women should die' or something like that…obviously they get banned eventually, but it gets like a thousand replies because it's controversial. We score threads on number of replies. Those with the most replies go to the top. Again, you have a few people that are the most extreme...while the rational ones go into oblivion.

As such, longer or more thoughtful posts about less sensational topics get less attention and fewer replies. This process signifies the function of these posts as a means of highlighting and reiterating the dominant masculinity within the incel community. Some support for these posts by incels may be found in public online spaces, such as Twitter. That being said, website users who do not identify as incels (e.g., women, non-incel men, women's groups) are likely to view these posts as explicitly offensive in nature and attempt to stigmatize the posters or upvoters making/supporting the posts and even have website administrators remove the post. The process of shit-posting, both within incel-spaces and in larger, public internet forums may function as a form of generating and reiterating dominant incel masculinity. Through posting vitriolic messages in incel forums, it appears that group members are attempting to generate a discourse that reiterates anti-feminist or anti-social beliefs as a means of proving their manhood within the incel collective. When posted in "public" forums, such as Twitter, it appears that group members are attempting to get a rouse out of non-incel users as a means of accomplishing masculinity.

Perceived Effects of Inceldom

This theme is conceptualized as negative emotions related to inceldom and personal experiences. While these perceived effects (e.g., depression, sadness, etc.) may also be a contributing factor to their inceldom and relationship struggles, most participants viewed these negative feelings as being a consequence of their situation. As previously stated, the masculine challenges and subhuman treatment may lead incels to accept the BlackPill as an explanation for their position and then engage in shit-posting as a means of lashing out. However, there is an additional byproduct or negative effect of marginalization: the feelings of isolation, rejection, and victimization prior to and after identifying as incel also occur in concert with feelings of sadness and a host of negative emotions ($n=7$). Whether these are perhaps the effects of their socialization on the forums and romantic rejection, or, in fact, the cause of them, this was a common experience in this sample. While a more detailed evaluation of causality is beyond the scope of this article, we believe that it is worthy of inclusion and consideration.

Prior to his decision to SEAmaxx, K said that he experienced "…extreme depression, suicidal thoughts, the feeling of extreme loneliness, the feeling of sadness. Basically feeling like shit all day." In the audio interview, the pain in his voice was evident as he described how romantic rejection and a lack of experiences or prospects affected his emotional well-being. K continued by explaining, "I was extremely suicidal just for the fact that I had no girlfriend and additionally that I [felt] hypersexual, and I wasn't able to fulfill that thing, so I basically wanted to kill myself almost every day or every week or every month…It was pure suffering, pure pain." Simon reflectively attempted to understand the manifestations of pain associated with identifying as an incel. He stated, "it should be noted that anger is a secondary emotion, meaning it stems from somewhere. So we're angry from feelings of rejection, depression, and frustration."

Frail described the emotions that are an ongoing consequence of his inceldom. He explained,

> [It makes me feel] like shit. It makes me completely isolated….It makes suicide become a daily and constant staple of my thoughts. It makes me feel at a loss. I feel completely full of grief constantly [to be honest]. Especially lately. Just realizing how pointless I am. It hurts. Like the loss of someone close. It's like that. A loss of life, self-worth, opportunity.

These types of feelings—rejection, anger, frustration, depression, and suicidality—may also to continue to hamper their prospects for romantic relationships, though many respondents argued that their outlook does not affect their chances of finding love, as "a lot of people are already set on hate towards us." However, when asked if his depression and anxiety cause his inceldom or vice versa, Mark explained, "It's circular. One reinforces the other." Mark's reflection mirrored Check et al. (1985) seminal work on men's loneliness and aggression in which they asserted, "…lonely people manage to 'turn off' potential friends, which often leads to rejection and subsequent isolation…Over time this vicious cycle becomes more and more difficult to break" (p. 249).

Ultimately, it is difficult to parse from these interviews if the participants' negative emotions are a direct result of their

inceldom or if their emotions existed before their involuntary celibacy and subsequently caused it. However, regardless of the temporal ordering of the inceldom and sadness, many of the participants make clear that these negative emotions are key staples of their own experiences as an incel. The information provided by our participants, as well as evidence from prior literature (Høiland, 2019; Jones, 2020; Lindsay, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020; Witt, 2020), indicates that negative emotionality is a major part of the dominant masculinity found in incel-spaces.

Discussion

Incels have found themselves at the forefront of public discussion mainly due to recent violence committed by self-proclaimed incels. This increase in attention from the public has led scholars from many different backgrounds to investigate inceldom and its discourses. Past research has demonstrated that inceldom is supportive of anti-feminist rhetoric and violence towards women (Ging, 2019; Høiland, 2019; Jones, 2020; Lindsay, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020); however less research has been done to examine the lived experiences of those who identify as incels. The current study addressed this gap in the literature using a phenomenological analysis of interview data with a small sample of members of the incel community.

The findings of this study indicate that inceldom provides a unique case study for hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018). As evidenced herein and elsewhere (Ging, 2019; Lindsay, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020), incels hold a relatively hierarchical view of gender whereby they view themselves as positioned at the bottom of the gender hierarchy. Evidence of these views were shown across the themes, particularly in instances where participants (for example, Frail, K, and Steven) spoke about failing to meet the social "standards" of manhood and being viewed as subhuman. These views are derived directly from BlackPill ideology, which emphasizes a hierarchical gender structure, whereby the hegemonic class of men (e.g., "Chads") marginalize other men by being more attractive and sexually successful (Lindsay, 2020; Maxwell et al., 2020).

This subordination led some participants, such as K and James FT, to engage in practices that reflect norms of hegemonic masculinity to raise their status within the hegemonic structure. K's use of SEAmaxxing allowed him to develop romantic relationships with women in countries where standards of attractiveness may differ from the traditional Western standards. Similarly, James FT underwent numerous plastic surgeries to conform more closely to the local standards of masculine attractiveness. These processes illuminate the discursive nature of hegemonic masculinity as discussed in Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Messerschmidt (2018), whereby compliance and conformity with dominant masculine ideals does little to alter their perceived subjugation. As such, these attempts *legitimate* unequal gender relations and hegemonic masculinity, rather than trying to find success through their own identity.

The hegemonic masculine structure is also legitimated and strengthened through incels' use of shit-posting. As mentioned, shit-posting allows for some incels to exert their anger online. Often, as discussed by many of the participants, some incels will specifically post inflammatory comments, pictures, or memes (sometimes espousing derogatory comments towards women, as indicated in some prior literature, Ging, 2019; Maxwell et al., 2020) in an effort to push back against the emasculation they feel from society. Such a process highlights the discursive element associated with hegemonic masculinity. When shit-posting occurs in public online spaces, such as Twitter or Reddit, the use of derogatory language and "shock factor" allows incels to construct or adopt a hegemonic masculinity. Such behavior is hegemonic in this context, as it perpetuates unequal gender relations (e.g., emphasizing that women are only of sexual value). Juxtaposed with this, when shit-posting occurs in incel-spaces (e.g., incel forums), this behavior generates and reinforces a dominant masculinity. Within these "private" spaces, incels can use shit-posting as a means of generating a shared worldview which provides them comfort and social acceptance within these spaces consisting entirely of like-minded individuals. Therefore, shit-posting is a multidimensional practice which can be used to achieve two ends: 1) shock the public (i.e., "normies") and generate a hegemonic masculine identity in "public" online spaces and 2) reiterate group ideology and find shared social support through a dominant masculinity within forums.

Another finding from these interviews suggest that negative feelings and emotions associated (or caused) by inceldom may also be pervasive in other areas of incels' lives. According to Frail, "you're dealing with people that are often very depressed, have given up, and have realized their lives will not be going anywhere." His statement, combined with the fact that many incels report being NEET (not educated, employed, or trained), highlight the ways that inceldom and the associated problems may be pervasive in their lives. The March incels.co (Incels.co, 2020) survey indicated that 24 percent of respondents ($N = 670$) reported that they do not work and/or study. While some participants in the study do hold regular jobs, others are, in fact, NEET. This may also support notions of marginalization and subordination, as they may be failing at achieving traditional accomplishments that are key to masculinity, and this is worth consideration for future research.

A final key finding of the interviews described negative emotions related to their inceldom. Some of the participants stated that their feelings of failure with relationships led them towards suicidal ideation and substance abuse. Many of the

participants stated that they were experienced negative symptoms that they associated with their circumstances. This is particularly unique compared to non-incels (who may also experience similar emotions in response to negative life events) in the context of the other themes that were present in the data. Incels, it seems, experience these negative emotions and associate their feelings with the BlackPill, shit-posting, and feeling "subhuman." While many non-incels may experience romantic struggles and subsequent sadness, the participants in this study seem to examine their own troubles in the context of broader society with a uniquely bleak outlook on their futures.

While none of the participants mentioned that they were clinically diagnosed with depression, the commonality of the statement and the frequency of negative emotions across the majority of the participants merit further investigation. When probed to elaborate, some participants stated that depression was a common trait in the incel community, and that depression may be tied to inceldom. That said, none of the participants generally discussed their lives prior to inceldom and the possibility exists that these depressive symptoms may be caused by inceldom or exist prior to adopting an incel identity. Moreover, there exists the possibility that, as Mark said, the relationship between negative emotions and inceldom is cyclical, as sadness can lead to further rejection and isolation which can, in turn, exacerbate the sadness. As such, the causal relationship between inceldom and depression merits future research, particularly from a clinical standpoint.

For a number of these participants, overcoming this severe sadness and other negative emotions was nearly impossible due to the BlackPill ideology. In these instances, the participants felt as though engaging in certain forms of treatment, such as therapy, would do little to reduce their depression, as they would still appear physically unattractive to society. Their acceptance of the BlackPill leads them to believe that given the importance of physical attractiveness in dating, their status or experiences are unlikely to change, and they are unable to meet the standards to which men are held. For others, such as K, he was able to overcome his depression by engaging in romantic relationships in Southeast Asian countries. K's ability to overcome depression through sexual and intimate relations, highlights the power that the hegemonic masculine superstructure holds over these men. Essentially, if they can perceive themselves as more of a man, then they are able to overcome their subordination and ascend beyond inceldom.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There were some limitations of the current study that are important to consider. First, incels, both individually and collectively, are often wary of outsiders, particularly journalists and researchers. As a result, many were hesitant to participate or share information, and most participants did not assist in the snowball sampling method. Moreover, because the most skeptical, oppositional, or even hostile incels would not have agreed to participate, and our sample size was very small, we cannot generalize to all incels or inceldom.

Additionally, because this is one of the first known studies which directly engaged incels, this research is primarily exploratory in nature, and the researchers cannot claim generalizability to all members of the incel community. While many incels have shared experiences, readers cannot presume that all incels have the same values, beliefs, and ideas about their own situations. Some elements of these data and interviews with incels, however, provide a stark difference from the common media portrayal of incels (as homicidal and violent), and it may offer insight to a broader range of emotions and feelings which can, in turn, affect policy and treatment responses. The work is also novel in that it is the first known qualitative academic study which directly engaged with incels to understand their experiences, perceptions, and perspectives about society and themselves. The researchers recognize that the sample size is small, even for qualitative research, but note that the "hidden nature" of incels makes them a difficult population to access. It is our hope that this publication—which aims to understand incel experiences from an unbiased perspective—may pave the way for more positive direct relationships between researchers and incels. Although seen as a violent or problematic group, we believe that direct engagement with members of the incel community is paramount for social reintegration. Though such engagements are likely to lead to small sample sizes due to the hidden nature of the population, these interactions may prove fruitful for future research opportunities and a generalization of findings across populations of incels from across the globe.

It is also noteworthy to consider the gender and race of the researcher who conducted the interviews. The first author, who conducted the interviews, is a relatively young, Asian woman; therefore, these immutable characteristics and other elements of social identity may have influenced the ways the interviewees responded. As Turner and Martin (1984) argue:

> The social characteristics of an interviewer and a respondent, such as age, race and sex are significant during their brief encounter: different pairings have different meanings and evoke different cultural norms and stereotypes that influence the opinions and feelings expressed by the respondents. (p. 271)

However, without a metacognitive interview with the participants about their reactions to her, it is impossible to know how these characteristics may have specifically affected responses, but it is certainly worth consideration for this study. In the writing of this article, the authors relied on reflection and discussion to evaluate their own social identity and compare it to the participants' "since it is the researcher's moral and social responsibility to ensure

participants' wellbeing during the research interaction" (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019, p. 10). The research process continues through the writing process, and the authors have often discussed their own reactions, social identities, and positionalities throughout the process.

This study has clear implications for future research. Primarily, it begins a more exploratory inquiry about individual experiences rather than an analysis of their rhetoric or generalizations about incels collectively. The aim of this study was to offer insights from direct communication with incels, as the vast majority, if not all, of the prior research conducted consists of content analyses of writings, forum posts, and discussions. Such interactions were incredibly important to the study of incels, and online subcultures as a whole, as the bulk of research has involved content analyses of incel posts and messages. We recommend that scholars from multiple fields of study, including criminology, sociology, psychology, and anthropology, continue to engage with this community. In doing so, scholars may foster research relationships that better the understanding of incels for group members and society alike.

We suggest that additional research foci for future studies should examine each of the themes presented in this article. Studies could include: 1) further investigation of masculinity challenges and the ways that incels may feel subordinated or marginalized; 2) the specific experiences that incels have with social rejection and "subhuman" treatment as well as its effects on their well-being; 3) the relationship between the BlackPill perspective and its effects on hopelessness, nihilism, fatalism, depression, and more; 4) the nature of shit-posting and incels' responses to reading and hearing the vitriol from the forums; and 5) the cyclical or causal nature of negative emotions and inceldom.

Additionally, this study found strong support for hegemonic masculinity as a framework for explaining and examining incel-identified men's experiences, especially regarding the relational and legitimating aspects of hegemonic masculinity. That said, hegemonic masculinity is not the only way to understand and describe western masculinities. Recently, Glace et al. (2021) utilized a hybrid masculinities framework (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) in an analysis of top incel posts on Reddit. Their analysis focused on the ways in which posts distanced themselves from traditional masculinity, borrowed social justice language, and attempted to generate social boundaries against non-incel men. While this study was firmly grounded in a hegemonic masculinity lens, and the interviews provided little evidence of borrowing social justice language or distancing from traditional masculinity, using a hybrid masculinities framework does have its merit. We believe that scholars should continue to engage with incel-identified men and explore how, when, and why members of the incel collective may strategically employ these hybrid masculinities.

One of the key findings of this study was the one of the central notions of the Blackpill perspective: participants' beliefs regarding the influence of physical attractiveness within society. For some participants, this belief pushed them towards plastic surgery and other body modifications in an effort to increase their desirability by women. As mentioned, this finding is reminiscent of the larger body of self-objectification literature which argues that society's perpetuation of a "standard of beauty" causes individuals, predominantly women, to engage in body modification practices as a means of treating themselves as objects in the eyes of others and striving to meet these standards (Calogero & Pina, 2011; Calogero et al., 2014). James FT discussed his own attempts to modify and improve his physical appearance to meet traditional expectations, and Ignas described his perceptions about improving his looks, specifically his height. This is also evident in the March 2020 incels.co survey which found that while only 6.6 percent of incels reported having had survey for cosmetic or aesthetic improvement, while 60.1 percent had considered it. The process by which some participants discussed seeking cosmetic surgery following inceldom seems to highlight a similar process of self-objectification and self-humanization, which one could argue may be related to their dehumanization (or subhuman stats) by women and socially dominant men. Future research should explore incel-identified men's self-objectification processes and how societal standards of attractiveness inform decisions to seek body modification/alteration.

Finally, additional qualitative research can also assist in the development of quantitative research. As researchers learn more about incels and gain more access to men who may be willing to share their perspectives, it may be important to consider the development of quantitative measures that expand upon the only survey of incels to date (Incels.co, 2020). These measures can provide more nuanced descriptive statistics and identify variables that have more explanatory power in predicting outcomes such as shared attitudes and beliefs among incels about themselves, the incel community, and society. Current quantitative data such as the incels.co biannual survey provides an introductory overview of the community and its members, but it also does not lend itself to complex analysis, as the majority of items from the survey are nominal level variables. This task, however, comes with a caveat in that developing and distributing a survey among a large group of incels requires a rapport and trust between the incel community and researchers.

Broadly speaking, we hope that these five themes may be beneficial to providing a foundation of understanding for future research, particularly as it relates to the negative emotions that are associated with inceldom, Even more, by centering this study using a hegemonic masculinity framework, it can potentially allow for a more nuanced understanding of incel experiences and behavior in the context of gendered expectations. The study can also continue to reinforce

notions that hegemonic masculinity not only harms women and LGBTQIA + individuals but also men who are subordinated or marginalized. Finally, we believe that the presentation of the BlackPill from our participants offers greater opportunities for understanding inceldom as a whole. If, in fact, researchers, practitioners, media and more, can better grasp the types of information (and subsequent beliefs) that are used to fuel and perpetuate the BlackPill perspective, it may lead to better approaches to studying incels and creating meaningful interventions.

Practice Implications

Although incels may believe that nothing that can be done to change their situation or their feelings, there might still be hope for some through the development of incel-based mental health resources (that are guided and informed by qualitative and quantitative research), as well as the promotion of "counterhegemonic practices that critique, challenge, or actually dismantle hegemonic masculinities" (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 142). Such approaches would not only assist marginalized men, but they could also promote positive gender relations and experiences. If counterhegemonic practices could, in fact, ultimately dismantle hegemonic masculinities, it could potentially allow for growth and increased social and romantic success for incels.

The findings from this research have the potential to inform psychological and psychiatric approaches particularly because they can offer insight into individual incels' experiences, self-perceptions, and outlooks. This work, while limited in its generalizability, can hopefully encourage mental health practitioners to better understanding the ways in which men from subordinated or marginalized groups examine their own masculinity (and their subhuman treatment and social rejection) and how these experiences can, in turn, be related to (or lead to) contrarian behavior (such as shit-posting) and the Blackpill. These approaches, combined with the potential for findings from innovative research that can expand on the qualitative work or quantify clinical characteristics (e.g., trauma history, attachment style, thought disfunction, maladaptive personality traits, etc.). Such information could be valuable in providing therapeutic treatment and patient-focused plans that allow for individual growth.

Finally, practices and policies (in concert with research) that highlight the negative effects of hegemonic masculinity would ideally promote ways to better understand individuals' views of their own worldview and situations.. We acknowledge that hegemonic masculinity is problematic as a whole and adds to greater inequities between women, men, and gender non-binary persons from across multiple social strata. Though incels may react to these problematic social structures in antisocial ways, we believe that it provides further evidence of the issues with hegemonic masculinity and gender inequality as a whole. Yet, if research and practices can address the underlying issues that have led men to their inceldom and individual incels are seen as men in crisis who are suffering, it may ultimately lead to a moment of reckoning, for "normies" and incels alike, regarding online behavior, civility, and even understanding.

Conclusion

The themes that emerged from this research—masculinity challenges, subhuman treatment, perceived effects of inceldom, BlackPill perspectives, and shit-posting—highlight the need for continued research in these areas, practical applications for prevention and intervention, and a nuanced theoretical application of the issues at hand. These interviews have demonstrated that there exists a diversity of thought amongst the incel community, and it is important for researchers and the public to understand the individual, cultural, and societal factors that have led to the creation, metamorphosis, and proliferation of the online community. More work is necessary, both in research and in practice, and it is the authors' hope that this research will encourage additional inquiry and response to the field of study.

Further, as the incel community and Manosphere-related violence become more prevalent topics within criminology, psychology, sociology, and other disciplines, it is important to understand the need for primary data collection. Linguistic and content analyses of forums provide insight and perspective about the online interactions in the incel community, but if academics and researchers aim to truly understand the factors that lead to inceldom and the community, then we must include incels in the process rather than relying on a snapshot of their online behavior or persona. Their behavior, like all human behavior, is a representation of a lifetime of experiences, emotions, and interactions that have led them to this community.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethics Approval This research was approved by the Saint Vincent College Institutional Review Board for research involving human participants. (Protocol #101016).

Informed Consent All participants agreed to the terms of the Informed Consent.

Conflicts of Interest There are no potential conflicts of interest.

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